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ABSTRACT

Census-based estimates suggest that at least 3.5 million children in the United States are limited-English-proficient or non-English-speaking. Half of all U.S. teachers have one or more of these children in their classes, but only one in 17 has any specific training to teaching English as a second langage (ESL). Of those actually teaching ESL classes, most have little or no specialized training. ESL instruction requires unique background and skills, and ESL teacher certification is needed to legitimize and institutionalize the field as licensure has in other specialized fields. Recommended ESL teacher education program elements include academic specialization (study of language in general and the systems of English, language learning processes, and language in culture), instructional methodology and assessment, teaching experience, and the learning of another language's linguistic structure and culture. At least 26 states and the District of Columbia have established certification or endorsement of ESL teachers, but not all of those states require teacher qualification in all of those program areas. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

ESL TEACHER CERTIFICATION

Prepared by Carol J. Kreidler
August 1986

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

ESL Teacher Certification

Prepared by Carol J. Kreidler

August 1986

What Is ESL?

ESL is the commonly used abbreviation for the relatively new profession of teaching *E*nglish as a *S*econd *L*anguage, or teaching English to people whose native or first language is not English. Just as teaching mathematics or French requires special knowledge and skills, so teaching ESL requires a background and skills that are unique.

Who Needs an ESL Teacher?

Estimates based on the 1980 Census indicate that in 1980-81 at least three-and-a-half million school-age children in the United States lacked the English language skills they needed to succeed in school without special English classes. They lacked these skills because English is not their native language. Such children generally fall into two groups: (a) limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, or those who speak, understand, and perhaps even read and write English, but not well enough to keep up academically with their native English-speaking peers; and (b) non-English-speaking (NES) students, or those who do not speak or understand English and who often have no literacy skills in their native language (a factor that complicates attempts to teach them English).

Who Teaches These Children Now?

A national survey (O'Malley, 1983) estimates that half of all public school teachers in the United States in 1980 either had LEP students in their classes or had taught such children previously. However, only 1 teacher in 17 had taken a course or courses in techniques for teaching ESL. Of those actually teaching ESL classes, 2 of 5 had minimal preparation, and 3 of 5 had no preparation.

Why Consider Certification?

Being a fluent speaker of English or even a teacher of English does not ensure that a teacher is academically prepared or qualified to teach the language to nonnative speakers. Just as teachers of Spanish as a second or foreign language must learn how to *teach* Spanish to nonspeakers as well as know how to *use* it themselves, so ESL teachers must learn to teach English to nonnative speakers.

There are many differences between teaching English to those who already speak it well and teaching it to nonnative speakers. To begin with, the objective of teachers of language arts or English is to help native speakers increase and refine their knowledge of their language and their skills in using it. In contrast, the objective of teachers of ESL is to give their students a basic, working command of the English language. What does this objective entail?

By the time they enter school, native speakers of English have learned how to pronounce English words and how to put them together into sentences with native-like pronunciation and structure. In addition, native speakers know certain rules of communication such as how to make suggestions and how to apologize. Such rules vary from culture to culture. These rules and other aspects of using English and of American culture in general form the basis for ESL instruction. Methods that are appropriate for teaching English to those who speak it as a first or native language are different from methods for teaching English to speakers of other languages. Those who teach LEP or NES students need special preparation.

In states where there is no certification for ESL, trained ESL teachers may be denied jobs on the grounds that they do not have certification in a subject recognized by their state as certifiable. Where this is the case, the education of ESL students is in jeopardy, since teachers assigned to ESL classrooms often do not have the necessary special training. The need for such special preparation would suggest the need for a next step as well—certification or licensure. Certification connotes the state's recognition that ESL requires special skills and knowledge. It legitimizes and institutionalizes the field just as licensure has done for such fields as special education.

What Constitutes Proper Preparation for Teaching ESL?

In 1975, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an international organization, adopted the *Guidelines for the Certification and Preparation of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in the United States*. In addition to defining the role and specifying professional competencies and personal qualities of the ESL teacher in Amer-

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ican schools, the guidelines list the features of an appropriate education program for teachers of ESL. Briefly, the major program components suggested are: (a) *academic specialization*, which includes courses covering language; the grammatical, phonological, and semantic systems of English; the process of language learning (both first and second languages); and language in culture; (b) *pedagogy*, which includes courses covering methodology, second language assessment, and practical experience; and (c) *the learning of another language*, including its linguistic structure and cultural system. These guidelines have been used by some colleges and universities to shape their professional preparation programs and by some states to develop their requirements for certificates or endorsements.

What Do States Require for Certification?

At least 26 states and the District of Columbia have established certification or endorsement of ESL teachers. A survey of state certification requirements (Kreidler, 1983), informally updated recently, indicates that course work totaling 24 or more credit hours is required by 15 states for their ESL certificate or endorsement. Information on credit hours was not available for 14 states, and details of curriculum requirements were not available for 13 states, usually because they simply list completion of "approved programs" as the requirement for certification. Of the 15 states for which there is information, all require ESL methodology courses, while 10 specifically cite practical experience, usually in the form of student teaching in ESL. In the area of academic specialization, 10 states require courses in linguistics and/or English linguistics while 9 require courses in culture and society. Six states require the learning of another language (since firsthand knowledge of the process of learning a second language in the classroom is considered beneficial).

States that have certification or endorsement in ESL are: Alaska, California (Language Development Specialist with emphasis in ESL), Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana (not required), Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia. Information on specific requirements for certification for each state can be obtained from the state department of education.

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Resources

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